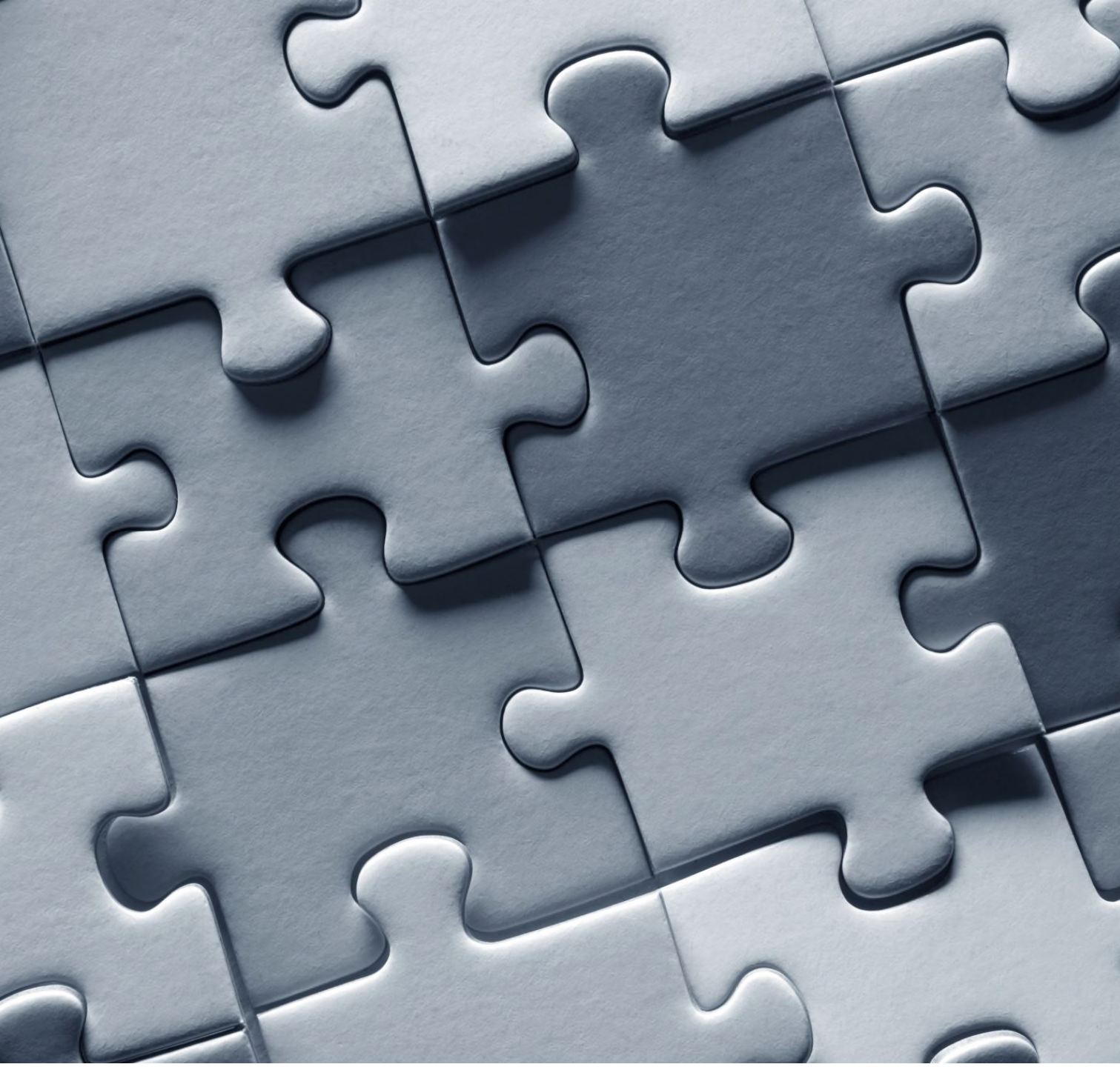


PROFESSIONAL SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON REWARD, RECOGNITION AND RESPONSIBILITY

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CGHE RoR Webinar 1



THESIS STUDY & CONTEXT

Doing the heavy lifting: the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities

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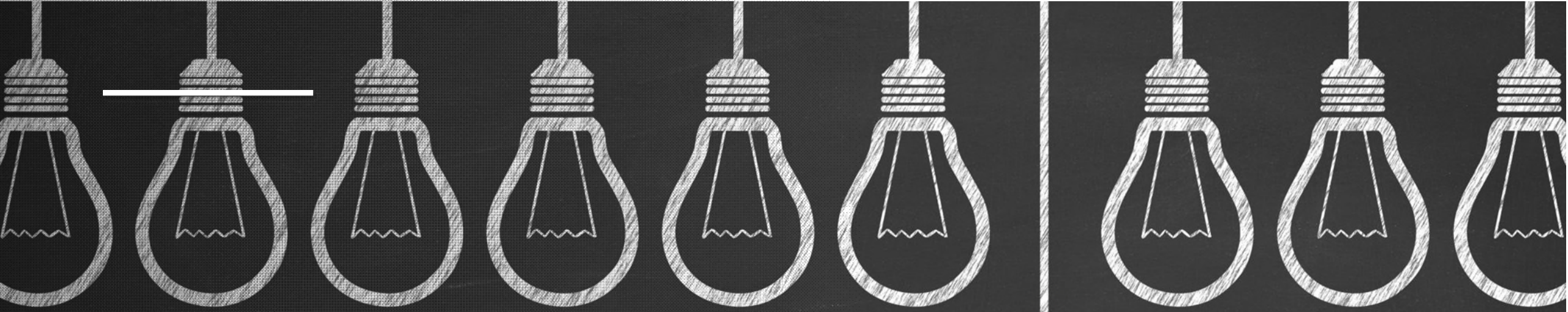
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of
Professional Doctorate in Education.
September 2023

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

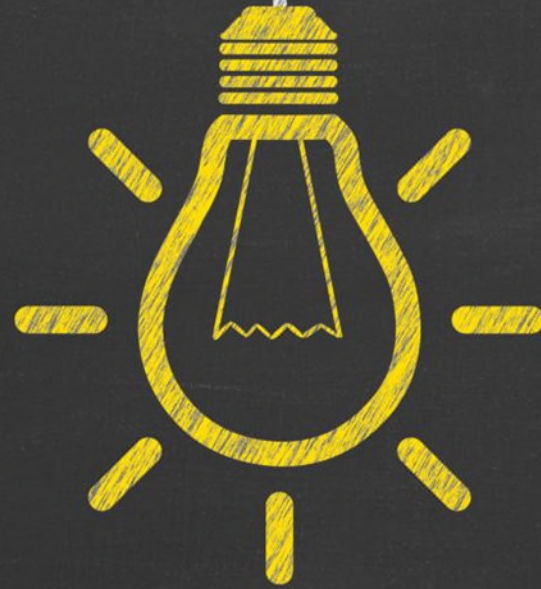
RQ1. What are the experiences of working-class professional service and administration staff at Russell Group universities?

RQ2. How is a working-class identity conceptualised by working-class professional services and administration staff at Russell Group universities?





**APPROACH:
PERSPECTIVE,
THEORY, METHODS
& ANALYSIS**



FINDINGS



**Conceptualising a
working-class
identity**

**Experiences of
working in Russell
Group universities**

**Interwoven
narratives**

Class discerned by economic metrics

If you're at school with middle class people, they would always have videotapes before, you know, your family had them or DVDs or computers or the internet. You're always a bit behind and you're left at a bit of a disadvantage.

I remember when I was a kid, we had a TV that you put 50 pence's in, and the person would come to collect the money and we would hide. I think it's those experiences of being aware of money, being aware of financial limitations, being aware of the fact that the household income can change.

FINDINGS: EXPLICIT CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CLASS

I grew up in a council estate in a village. And there were no buses after four or five at night. So, we would have to walk to the ballet classes. And my mum would have to bring my dinner with me that she would have made for me. And she would sit there with me when I did my ballet class and then walk home. It must have been about a 40-minute walk. And you just think she gave up like, three, four hours of her time just so I could go and do ballet classes. You know, it's a really loving thing to do. I probably moaned the whole way there and the whole way back.

Class discerned by tastes and dispositions

We would go to Butlins that was our kind of family thing. This one time we went to one down in Bognor Regis or somewhere and if we'd had a car, it would have been you know, maybe a couple of stops. But we had to make for train journey swap overs train and all these things, there's a lot of stuff that you have to plan around to make the cheapest journey you can to get somewhere.

*'He's [my line manager] been in academia for 40 years or something, you know, and he brings out references to Greek mythology and things that, you know, like as if, I would understand these things that he's comparing something to, I can't even replicate the conversations because I'm just not aware. **And it feels a little alien.***

FINDINGS: EXPLICIT CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CLASS

*You're having conversations about things like theatre and you're not having conversations, because you don't know what they're talking about, because you've never been to the theatre. And I think there's this sense that **your culture isn't worthy***

When I went to university there were people there who had very different life experiences to me. I had presumptions about what that means how I might be expected to dress, to talk, to behave and that was very different from how I might have spoken and behave and dressed at home.

REWARD AND RECOGNITION: VALUE (PAY)

*I get paid for 35 hours a week. Don't get paid any overtime and TOIL doesn't happen. I probably regularly work 12-to-13-hour days. I was in all day Sunday. I am not alone in that... We're all the same across the board. **We're extremely overworked** to deliver this world leading student experience that people talk about.*

*They're like; "All right, well, we're not going to regrade you, [but] we will give you a discretionary award at the end of the year." It's 1000 pounds, but after tax you get like 500 quid. You come away being like, yeah, great. Okay, I've negotiated that. Actually... **I've done hundreds of hours of overtime this year and kept the place going. And I've got £500.***

*And I think a lot of us locally, again, because of this whole thing, where we think **we're lucky to have a job**, we're never going to go into that, and negotiate that in the right way, or the way that's gonna get us a positive outcome.*

I think the culture is you work beyond your hours to get things done. I don't think the university likes to admit it. But people do a lot of work that they aren't actually paid for

*I think it undermines real employee benefits like decent pay and also perpetuates this awful view that **people, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, should put up and shut up and feel grateful and blessed be given the opportunity** to study or work in [the university].*

I [took on greater responsibilities] And I wasn't getting paid for it. I didn't get an acting up allowance.

REWARD AND RECOGNITION: CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION

There was a period where I felt like my opportunities to progress were limited. Because I didn't want to play the game. So that's a little bit on me, you know, because we all have to play the game a little bit. I just was like, I'm not interested I'm not gonna do it, I'm not gonna go and be a secretary for senior committee just so I get visibility when I'm writing notes. I don't want to do that.

It's a bit of a weird one progression within my role, I'd need to take on a more management-based experience...even if that was something I wanted to go into, the opportunities are not actually there to progress.

I think a lot of Administrative staff members know there's not really an opportunity for them.

...there's only so much you can do realistically. I'm kind of waiting for her to leave or go on maternity, that's my opportunity. They're my immediate options, if I wanted to progress where I am.

REWARD AND
RECOGNITION:
CAREER
DEVELOPMENT
AND
PROGRESSION

They have a designated portal for staff development. Not a lot of other universities have that level of development opportunities. I feel very lucky to actually have access to those sorts of opportunities.

I feel like I need to have some kind of idea of where I want to go long term, but it's the kind of role that doesn't naturally lead to anywhere specific.

I'd like some other training. My department basically rejected any other training until I finished my degree, and which I wasn't happy with.

I think it can be quite insular...just in general, sometimes HE, I think it feels a little bit nepotistic like there's always internal candidates.

At points, I felt disillusioned with the opportunities to progress. Because it felt like it felt like there were a few shining stars

I'm not really interested in line managing. So my options for progression, are kind of limited to more advanced technical roles, architecture roles. I think the kind of soft skills that you may have if you've been independently schooled...tend to get you promoted into kind of people, management jobs.

REWARD AND RECOGNITION: VALUE (STRUCTURES AND CULTURE)

*I think academic colleagues are still held up as the like, the main deal, aren't they? And the rest of us are just sort of **helping them shine**.*

*I've worked in the marketing team and raised a valid point, just because of someone's hierarchy and their education **our opinion doesn't matter as much, because we're professional services**.*

I think it's perceived that the admin work for the academics rather than the other way around. I just had a couple of emails, [where an academic said] "I'm really sorry, I don't have time for this". Or they go on annual leave, like five weeks at a time. Trying to pin down anyone in July or August, It's just absolute chaos.

I think there's noticeable difference between academics and professional services. I think people tend to think that the academics are what holds the university together. But it's not, it's really not. It's all the people who are Uh, you know, data entry...[the] admin team do the heavy lifting I think

*Academics eat lunch in one room and professional services staff eat lunch in another they're differentiated because you're not like a fellow or you know, like a proper member you're like... **staff**.*

I've just felt conscious in myself. Conscious of maybe working with, like academic staff more. And, you know, conscious of, you know, where do you fit into all that. In terms of going to meetings, what are the expectations of whether you will speak up within those? You know, whether there's a kind of expectation that you're just there to listen.

REWARD AND
RECOGNITION:
VALUE
(RELATIONSHIPS
WITH OTHER
STAKEHOLDERS:
STUDENTS AND
PROF SERVICES
TEAMS)

I think I'm personally very lucky that I have an excellent line manager.

I'm very fortunate that I work in a supportive team, and I work doing something that matters to me. And I think that makes that makes a big difference

...it's trying to keep a foot in both camps, and almost feeling like a fraud as a working-class person, because you're not what some people would consider to be working-class. So, I've often felt at times in this sort of limbo place.

You know, and I don't pretend to know exactly what it's like to be a working-class teenager now because it's different, but at the same time, I still have levels of understanding of like the anxieties that they go through, and things like that, and like worries they might have.

I think there are other PS staff that I think are working-class so I don't feel out of place within that environment, of other professional services groups

REWARD AND
RECOGNITION:
VALUE
(RELATIONSHIPS
WITH OTHER
STAKEHOLDERS:
ACADEMICS)

*I've been in meetings before where the language goes above me...**and I felt not included** because I thought I haven't got a clue what they're talking about.*

I think that there is a real sort of divide between academic staff and professional services. There's certain academics who just sort of treat you like their PA, which is really weird. They'll ask you to do things that are outside of your remit. Which is some weird sort of hierarchical thing.

I've got that [my masters degree] in my signature. I'm trying to like signal to them [academics] I'm not an idiot, I've got qualifications.

I still get urgent emails where someone needs an answer by the end of the day, because they are used to people just moving around them.

*...there are quite a few academics that I know that are from working class backgrounds. And we've been able to collaborate, like [on] widening participation. And there are other academics [who are] maybe a little harsher and more direct. You know, **that made me feel a little bit more self conscious.***

...they just think you are, like, scum.

I mean, they [academics] can be absolutely awful to us

*We'd be running sessions with schoolchildren, and academics would come out of their offices and shout at members of staff because the students were being too loud. And it's like, we're all trying to do a job. Just because you're stressed in yours, doesn't mean you should **treat people in disrespectful ways.***

CONCLUSION: 3 KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The concept of what it means to be working class, at least for these participants is different from a traditional concept of being related to employment. Every participant explicitly described a working-class identity as being connected to economic circumstances, with some relating other factors to this such as employment, cultural taste and historic family position
 - Most working-class professional services people in this study experienced supportive PS teams and line managers, with good basic training. **However, nearly all described relationships with academics as ‘the worst part of my job’.** They also experienced closed career pathways, exclusive cultural environments which preference certain tastes and dispositions, symbolic violence, microaggressions and a distinct feeling of being undervalued.
 - Value was attributed to professional services work inconsistently. This is represented by participants as an inconsistency in access to promotion and progression, through value asserted by structures and process within the institution and insufficient remuneration for work performed.
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WHERE NEXT?



Global perspectives of research professional and professional services staff in higher education



Follow up funding non-WC professional services and administration experiences as a UK-wide mapping exercise



Further research on WC professional service and administrative staff experiences and contributions



Edited collection of WC experiences in UK HE book with Emerald (2025)

FOR MORE INFO:



Pilgrim-Brown, J. (2023). **Doing the heavy lifting....** EdD Thesis: Oxford Brookes University
<https://doi.org/10.24384/rr87-x204>



Pilgrim-Brown, J. (2023). **What does it mean to be working class?...**
doi.org/10.13001/jwcs.v8i2.8401



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